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ABSTRACT

Poems written by Anna Akhmatova, the major woman writer in Russia in the first half of the twentieth century, are presented and discussed in this paper. In a brief overview of Akhmatova's work, it is noted that she was vitally concerned with the expression of her experience as a woman poet and a lover, and that she portrayed both male lovers and husbands in negative ways. Poems are then explicated to show Akhmatova's treatment of her major themes. Among the poems dealt with are "The Guest," a version of the story of don Juan, which shows the powerlessness of don Juan's women; a poem in which marriage is seen as confining; "Lot's Wife," in which Lot is seen as an obsessed being and as ignorant of the inner world of the woman narrator; a poem in which Akhmatova appears to grapple with the eventuality of her own eclipse and the rise of other women poets; "Epigram," in which women artists are perceived as threats or annoyances; and "To Poetry," which encapsulates Akhmatova's treatment of her most common poetic themes-poetry, women poets, love, and male lovers-and her differing attitudes and expectations regarding men and women. A bibliography of Akhmatova's works in translation is included. (GW)

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Love's Pain: Anna Akhmatova and Sexual Politics

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Love's Pain

The poetry of Anna Akhmatova was new to Russia because she provided a female lyrical voice--her masks were those women Russian literature had traditionally left silent-- and because she takes for her theme the one which poets of the West have used for centuries, and which Denis de Rougemont call the theme of western literature, tragic love. Throughout her long and productive poetic career, Anna Akhmatova was vitally and essentially concerned with the expression of her experience as a woman poet and a lover. Love for her is dangerous, threatening, and yet enticing and fascinating.

These two characteristics of her poetry are my reason for speaking of it on this panel today. She should be known by Women's Studies faculty for another reason, too. Akhmatova is the first major woman poet in all of Russian literature. She has been instrumental in the encouragement of other woman poets of her generation, like Marina Tsvetaeva and Zinaida Gippius, or among the many excellent woman poets of the present. But Akhmatova was not a feminist; she remained trapped within the patriarchal value system. She was not blind to it. She did not misunderstand it, but she did not criticize its existence. It is perhaps unfair to expect that she would. The startling clarity of her verse and the refusal to mystify sexual relationships which involve power on a personal level are what is of particular interest to contemporary feminists and students of literature.

Her poetry is sexist. Men are portrayed as powerful adversaries when they are lovers, and as figures of pity, antipathy or ennui when they are husbands. Both lovers and husbands lack what Akhmatova would consider a "feminine" trait--tenderness--and so friendship with them is made practically impossible. For Akhmatova, a man always remains "the other," an external to the self. On the other hand, women are portrayed as competition for a lover or for fame as a poet. Exceptions to this portrayal of women occur when the poem is about a man: Akhmatova will often identify with women who are her allies against the common (male) foe. Or in discussing women as poets, she will at times identify with their mutual artistic endeavor. For women are masks, personae doubles and projections of the self.

The general tendency, however, is clear. The predominant theme of heterosexual love combines with the female lyrical voice in Akhmatova's poetry in such a way that romantic love is seen as woman's main concern. Love is her vocation and avocation as well. Women's relationships with each other are not nearly as interesting or as important to her and have been subordinated to the quest for moments of passion and the thrill of love.[1]

The poems I have chosen to deal with in more detail here are examples of this tendency. Primarily they are from early collections of her work because the poems of the Pre-Stalin period have been translated more often and because the theme of love's pain is especially clear in them.[2] These poems demonstrate her consciousness of power in human relationships, her positive self-image, and her double standard of behavior for men and women.

She reiterates love's pain:

> So you thought me the standard romantic
> To be dropped and forgotten, of course;
> That I'd fling myself, sobbing and frantic
> To the hooves of a runaway horse.[3]

s . again:

> All growing closer ends upon a fateful verge,
> Not to be cheated by inloveness or possession-
> However lip and lip in awesome silence merge,
> And heart would burst in two from love's oppression.[4]

In two variations on this theme, love is personified. They begin with these lines: "Now by the heat, furled still/ Like a snakelet, its magic brewing,"[5] and "Love vanquishes craftily, weaving/ Enchantments artless and fey."[6]

Certain poems by Akhmatova are extraordinarily rich in allusions and are thus capable of sustaining a more complex analysis. One such poem is "The Guest" and can be understood on at least two levels. The guest of the title may be the lover in the poem, or the title may be the Stone Guest of the don Juan theme.

Understood in this second manner, "The Guest" is, at least, the third major Russian version of the story of don Juan, the first being Pushkin's "The Stone Guest," a verse drama (1830),[7] and the second Alexander Blok's "Comes the Commendatore" (1910-12).[8] Akhmatova surely was familiar with both.[9] The earlier poems are sources for her poem, but she was not merely imitating her predecessors. "The Guest" is unique in that don Juan and his infamous career are seen from the point of view of the women in his life.

The Guest

> All as before: against the dining-room windows
> Beats the scattered windswept snow,
> And I have not changed either,
> But a man came to me.
>
> I asked: "what do you want?"
> He replied: "To be with you in Hell."
> I laughed: "Oh, you'll foredoom
> Us both to disaster."
>
> But lifting his dry hand
> He lightly touched the flowers:
> "Tell me how men kiss you,
> Tell me how you kiss men."

And his lusterless eyes
Did not move from my ring.
Not a single muscle quivered
On his radiantly evil face.

Oh, I know: his delight
Is the tense and passionate knowledge
That he needs nothing,
That I can refuse him nothing.[10]
-January 1, 1914

"All as before" could refer to the many previous incarnations of this favorite Romantic topos and to the fact that this poem is a sequel in the career of don Juan. The "blown snow" and "dining-room windows" of the first stanza show the influence of Blok, in whose poem the setting has been changed from Andalucía and Castilla, the original home of the seducer, to the North, most probably to Russia itself. Coldness is important in Blok's poem where it functions as a metaphor for don Juan's personality: "cruel" and "empty." Blok's poem begins: "A door with a heavy curtain, windows/ closed on the night," and continues in the second stanza with: "Elegant bedroom empty, cold;/ servants asleep, blackness."

"I have not changed,/ But a man came to me," is Akhmatova affirming that she is raising a mask to become one of the victims of don Juan's lust. In Pushkin's drama, three women are mentioned: Inez, killed by her jealous husband; Laura, bold actress and seductress, passionately in love with don Juan; and doña Anna, his latest victim, a widow whose husband, the Stone Guest and the statue of the Commendatore, returns from the dead to take don Juan to Hell. In the middle three stanzas of "The Guest," Akhmatova merges these three women and then speaks for them. In Pushkin, it is doña Anna who asks don Juan what he wants, Inez who is ruined. Laura is found by don Juan in the arms of an enemy: a compromising situation which might prompt questions from don Juan about the kissing of other men. The fourth verse refers to both Pushkin's and Blok's doña (or Donna) Anna, the widow whom don Juan watched silently in the

disguise of a hermit and who spoke to him out of loneliness and grief.

The detail of the ring in stanza four is particularly meaningful in terms of Akhmatova's own poetic symbolism. In the collection Plantain or Wayside Herb (1921), a ring has special powers.

> ...
> a stranger asked me quietly:
> "Are you the one I searched for everywhere,
> for whom since my earliest days
> I have been glad and grieved--as though for a dear
> sister?"
> I answered the stranger, "No!"
> And when the light from the heavens shone on his
> face
> I gave him my hands.
> He gave me a secret ring
> to guard me against love. ...[11]
> -1916

Is it a wedding ring? Is the complacency of marriage a protection from the torments of passion?

The women's powerlessness is the common element in all of the stanzas; each of don Juan's women, in this poem as in most versions, is a victim of his power. The reiteration of the word "nothing" heightens the contrast between the utter submission of the personae or persona and the autonomy of the lover. His malevolence and the hegemony of his passion are particularly emphasized in the final couplet. Antagonism between the sexes has been heightened by the presence of love, passion and sex: that "inloveness or possession" which breeds despair.

Husbands do not fare any better than lovers in Akhmatova's poems. Take for example the poem which begins:

> Me, honor and obey? You've lost your mind!
> I only heed what the Almighty utters.
> I have no use for suffering or flutters,
> Husband spells headsman to me, housed--confined.[12]

In another poem, the husband is merely the"unloved one" to whom she returns after being with her lover.[13] In "Thirteen Lines," the experience of turning

down a marriage proposal is described,[14] and in a farewell poem to a lover recently married, she is jealous, although she denies it.[15]

A transitional poem between those poems which lambaste men and those which express jealousy of women is "Lot's Wife." It is critical of the portrayal of this Biblical figure who doesn't even possess a name of her own, and of Lot who did not grieve when he lost her.

Lot's Wife

But his wife looked back from behind
him, and she became a pillar of salt.
-Genesis [19:26]

The just man strode after God's messenger proudly,
Prodigious and bright, along mountains of black.
But aching unease to his lady spoke loudly:
There's time yet--it wasn't too late to look back

On the stately red towers of the Sodom she fled now,
The court of her singing, the hall where she span,
The goodly high mansion, its window-gaps dead now,
Wherein she gave birth for the love of a man.

She looked--and by lethal oblivion assaulted,
Her eyes lost the art to take in any more;
To luminous rock-salt her body was altered,
Her nimble feet merged with the quartz of the tor.

Who weeps for the woman, who thinks to regret her?
Who does not account her the less for her lack?
My own heart alone cannot ever forget her,
Who laid down her life for a single glance back.[16]
-1922-24

The female narrator in this poem is different from that of "The Guest"; she is strong, decisive, and has a will of her own. But the negativity of the portrait of the man, in this case a husband, has changed little: he is still an obsessed being and ignorant of the inner world of the woman narrator.

Both don Juan and Lot are lacking in tenderness: the "enlightened evil face" and the "just man" cannot go beyond their male roles as seducer and believer to be gentle or to grieve. Akhmatova is describing the kind of man

for whom power over others is the closest approximation he can imagine to caring for others. A woman becomes a satisfying love object to the extent that she participates in the contest of wills in "The Guest," or that she follows Lot in his holy departure from Sodom. It is as if the softer emotions would create a breach in the wall of male power.

Female power rules precisely in that realm of tender emotions vacated by man, where affection, kindness and nurturing reign. Woman's main activity is seen as writing poetry. That is, most of the positive and active female images are doubles for Akhmatova herself.

--"I have come to take your place, sister,
At the wooded, at the tall fire.

Your hair has turned gray. A tear
has dimmed, misted your eyes.

You no longer understand what the birds sing,
You notice neither the stars nor the glow of distant lightning.

And the tambourine beat has stopped long ago,
Though I knew you were afraid of quiet.

I have come to take your place, sister,
At the wooded, at the tall fire . . ."

--"You have come to bury me.
Then where is your pick, where is your spade?
You have only a flute in your hands.
I will not blame you,
For it is a pity that long ago, at some time,
Forever my voice fell silent.

Wear my clothes,
Forget my alarm,
Let the wind play with your curls.
You smell like lilacs,
Though you have come by a difficult road
To stand here, dawn-lit."

And one went away, yielding,
Yielding her place to the other,
And wandered unsure, as if blind,
By an alien, narrow path.

And it always seemed that the flame
Was near . . . the hand holds the tambourine . . .
And she is like a white standard,
And she is like a lighthouse beam.[17]
-1912

Akhmatova eventually would attain recognition as the major woman writer in Russia in the first half of the twentieth century and as an important figure in the history of Russian literature. I believe she foresaw this eventuality and the subsequent necessity of her own eclipse, and attempted to grapple with it in this poem. The woman "lighthouse beam" is the woman poet or women poets of love who will shine light upon human experience and warm themselves at the "tall fire" of passion as Akhmatova did. She created a double for herself whose coming meant the continuity of poetry and of woman's voice, but the approach of death and of silence for herself. The idea of being replaced implies that the success of other women has become inextricably bound to one's own failure. This attitude is at least ambivalent toward women, if it is not entirely negative.

I am confirmed in my opinion of "I have come to take your place, sister," by the poem "Epigram", written in 1960 when Akhmatova was seventy-one years old. With Akhmatova's strength of character, her experience and talent, any jealousy of other women poets she might feel would be excessive. But she chose to give a selfish and peevish retort to their pleas for support and encouragement.

Epigram

Could Beatrice fashion such a work as Dante's,
Or Laura praise love's fever and love's chill?
I showed woman her voice and how to use it,
But, God, how can one teach her to be still?[18]
-1960

One would like to think that the clarity with which Akhmatova exposed the sexual politics of love relationships would prevent any woman from being

still, ever again. Akhmatova was proud of her poems, proud of being looked up to by young women poets, but she was finally unwilling, or too tired, to respond to the barrage of women's voices which followed her solitary flute. She perceives women artists are threats or as annoyances.

In "A String of Quatrains," two verses entitled "To Poetry" encapsulate my thesis: that poetry and women poets, love and male lovers, are Akhmatova's most common subjects and that her poems show a differing attitude toward the sexes, different images and expectations for men and women.

To Poetry

You led us through the pathlessness
like a falling star in the darkness.
You were bitterness and lies,
and never comfort.

Fame swam like a swan
through the golden mist
and you, love, were always
my despair.[19]

Poetry is "bitterness" and love "despair" for Akhmatova because they reflect the realities of many personal relationships under patriarchy, where an imbalance of male and female power has become polarized into an adversary relationship by intense feeling.

Notes

1 Other major themes in her poetry are the Stalinist terror, the writing of verse and God.

2 Akhmatova's major collections of verse are the following: Evening (1912); Beads or Rosary (1913-14); White Flock (1917); "By the Sea Shore," and Anno

Domini MCMXXI including the collection Plantain or Wayside Herb (1921); Reeds or Bulrushes (1940); A Poem without a Hero (1960); Requiem (1963); and some new poems in The Course of Time (1965). (Walter Arndt, ed. and trans., Anna Akhmatova, Selected Poems (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1976), pp. xxxiii-xxxvi.

[3]Arndt, p. 71.

[4]Arndt, p. 38.

[5]Arndt, p. 7.

[6]Arndt, p. 6.

[7]Alexander Pushkin, Pushkin, trans. A.F.B. Clark, ed. introd. Ernest J. Simmons (N.Y.: Dell, A Laurel Reader, 1961), pp. 119-139.

[8]Burton Raffel, trans., introd., Russian Poetry Under the Tsars (Albany: State U. of N.Y. Press, 1971), pp. 209-10.

[9]For a full discussion of the influence of these two writers on Akhmatova, see Amanda Haight, Anna Akhmatova, A Poetic Pilgrimage (N.Y.: Oxford U., 1976).

[10]Carl R. Proffer, Russian Lit. Quarterly 1 (1971), 17.

[11]Richard McKane, trans., Anna Akhmatova, Selected Poems (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), p. 50.

[12]Arndt, p. 76.

[13]Sam Driver,"Anna Akhmatova: Early Love Poems," Russian Lit. Triquarterly 1 (1971), 300.

[14] Arndt, p.108.

[15] Jamie Fuller, trans., "I do not ask your love again," Russian Lit. Quarterly 1 (1971), 16.

[16] Arndt, p. 82.

[17] Barbara Heldt Monter, trans., The Silver Age of Russian Culture, eds. Carl Proffer and Ellendea Proffer (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1975), p. 250. According to Amanda Haight (p. 36), Akhmatova told her friend Lidiya Chukovskaya that she herself did not understand this poem. I think she did not understand it because the poem can be understood as the narration of an internal struggle and an inner fear, and gives voice to metaphysical anxieties about death and poetry, as well as on the level of personal relationships as I have done here.

[18] Vladimir Markov and Merrill Sparks, eds., Modern Russian Poetry (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 281.

[19] Richard McKane, trans., Post-War Russian Poetry, ed., introd., Daniel Weissbort (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1974), p. 21.

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